



CLEY NEXT THE SEA

PEOPLE AND PLACE

Scenically Cley has everything a North Norfolk village should have! A famous windmill (star of the well known BBC trailer featuring the mill with drifting hot air balloon), a magnificent church of cathedral-like scale, traditional flint-walled and pantiled cottages and a wild backdrop of marshes and reedbeds. Shame today it lacks a village school, a bakery and a doctor's surgery though at least the village post office is still open. Cley in many ways is an icon of all that's traditionally North Norfolk and the subject of countless photos and artists' paintings.

Cley has many moods. In the short summer holiday season the narrow main street is full of hustle and bustle. The coast road narrows through the village and the sharp corner in the centre is really only suitable for a single line of traffic. This leads to frequent tail-backs and queues on busy weekends and Bank Holidays – perhaps not surprising when one considers this road was originally a route just for horses and carts delivering and collecting goods to and from Cley's once-busy harbour.

Outside holiday periods Cley is very different, quiet – perhaps too quiet – because of the high proportion of second and holiday homes which risk taking the heart out of the local community. However, throughout the year, the influx of birders on pilgrimage to the birdwatchers' mecca of Cley Marshes, as well as walkers drawn here

by the light, colour and wildness of the coastal landscape, bring welcome all-season trade. Their revenues help sustain many B&Bs, an excellent pottery, several cafes and galleries and ensure that businesses such as the George Hotel, Picnic Fayre – an excellent delicatessen – and Cley's famous Smoke House seafood shop continue to thrive.

Undoubtedly the best way to explore Cley is on foot. Off the High Street discover the narrow lokes – passages between ancient flint walls – which run up to higher ground. Part of this area was the red light district when Cley was a busy port! On foot it's easy to spot many clues to Cley's history. The front of Whalebone House (now a vegetarian café) has bones not of whales but of sheep and horses in patterns among the flints – a reminder of the bonemeal fertilizer industry that flourished during the nineteenth century. No exploration of Cley would be complete without a walk to the famous windmill which milled flour from the early 1800s until the 1920s. It's now holiday accommodation but the interior can sometimes be visited on afternoons during the summer season. Equally Cley's church, St Margaret's of Antioch, with its magnificent windows, stonework, brasses and wonderful views across the River Glaven valley to Wiveton and Blakeney churches is essential visiting. The Three Swallows pub adjacent is an excellent refreshment stop.

TIME AND TIDE

Cley may be a quiet village today but in medieval times it was a thriving fishing town, a busy international trading centre and, at its height, one of the greatest ports in England.

The narrow meandering River Glaven of today is a far cry from the original tidal estuary which at high tide flooded the valley between Cley and Wiveton. The river was once tidal as far inland as Glandford. Medieval Cley took ships up to 130 tons and Wiveton was a busy shipbuilding centre. Cley was the most important of the Haven ports – Cley, Blakeney, Wiveton and Salthouse. The original town and harbour were close to the medieval church, St Margaret's. After the great fire of Cley in September 1611, when 117 houses were destroyed, the town and wharves moved north towards the present High Street area, in part because silting of the Glaven restricted navigation higher up the river.

Cley remained for centuries an international trading centre and consequently also a notable smugglers' haunt. Its ships traded as far afield as Norway, Greece, Spain, France and Germany. Local Norfolk produce of barley, wheat, oats, wool, malt and oysters were important exports with ships returning with exotic cargoes of spices, fine cloths and wines. The trade with Rotterdam and the Low Countries was especially important. Today the Dutch influence is still visible in the curving Dutch gables on many Cley houses.

Cley was also an important fishing port. Cley fishermen ventured to waters as far away as Iceland. There were local oyster beds to be worked for the trade with London, and lobsters and crabs to be harvested from inshore waters. Associated with this trade was the demand for salt for packing and preserving fish. While much salt was imported there is also evidence of local salt production on Cley Marshes. Daniel Defoe writing in 1794 records 'large salt works in Cley which produce very good salt', and early OS maps show salt pans on the marshes edging the village.

The demise of this once great port was brought about by the silting of the Glaven estuary – not an entirely natural process but in large part due to land reclamation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As late as the 1800s trade continued but smaller boats, lighters, were used

to take goods for loading onto seagoing vessels anchored in the deeper water of Blakeney Pit. A typical lighter run with a four-man crew was a 14-hour round trip with a load of 45 tons of grain on the way out and 45 tons of coal back into Cley. The final nail in the coffin for this trade was the growth of King's Lynn as a major port and the development of the rail network, providing faster and cheaper inland transport.



Above: Stained glass – St Margaret's church, Cley.

FLOTSAM AND JETSAM

~ What's in a name? The name Cley simply means clay. Indeed there is always argument over whether the name of the village should be pronounced 'Cly' or 'Clay'. Both can be heard. 'Next to the Sea'? Well in medieval times, when the Glaven was a tidal estuary, Cley village really was next to the sea.

~ Cley Eye. The higher land alongside Beach road, now part of the Norfolk Wildlife Trust reserve, takes its name from the Old English term 'Eye' meaning an island. This higher ground was originally an island among tidal saltmarshes.

~ Plagued. The Black Death came to Cley in 1349. It is said that Norfolk's population fell by between a third and a half during plague years. The building of parts of St Margaret's church was delayed by its destructive effects, with the original plans never fully completed.

~ Buried in wool. Wool was the source of wealth that allowed the building of magnificent churches such as those at Cley, Salthouse and Blakeney. However, by the seventeenth century the industry was in decline. The Burial in Wool Acts of 1667 and 1679 were an unusual way of supporting a declining industry. The Acts made it law that, 'No corpse of any person, except those who shall die of the plague, shall be buried in any shirt, shift, sheet or shroud ... or any stuff or thing other than what is made from sheep's wool only'. Churches, including St Margaret's at Cley, could fine any burial that contravened these Acts.

~ Many old houses in Cley are said to contain smugglers' holes where contraband was hidden from the King's Customs men.

~ Smugglers' haul. The Norfolk Chronicle of 16 December 1824 reports on the seizure of 120 half ankers of geneva (gin), 19 bags of tobacco and 10 bags of snuff in a confrontation with smugglers at Cley.

~ Iron constitution. The delicatessen 'Picnic Fayre' is on the site of the original village forge said to have been built in 1607 to make cannons for the English fleet. Look for the old anvil and beam drill in the shop!

~ The tall white-fronted building near Cley windmill was originally a Customs house built in 1680.

~ William White's Norfolk Directory of 1845 records passenger vessels sailing to London and Hull once a fortnight from Cley's harbour.

~ In 1570 Cley had 13 ships belonging to the town and 65 mariners.

~ Cley pirates. Sailors from Cley captured a Scottish ship bound for France in March 1406. On board was Prince James of Scotland. The eleven-year-old boy was sent to London where Henry 1V held him hostage.

~ Cley pilgrims. The Glaven ports were licenced to carry pilgrims because of their closeness to Walsingham. In 1434 a ship from Cley took 60 pilgrims to the Shrine of St James the Apostle at Santiago de Compostella in Spain.

WILDERNESS AND WILDLIFE



From far left:
 One of Britain's rarest breeding birds – a bittern in the reeds at Cley Marshes. An otter swimming below the water's surface in a dyke at Cley. Ratty from *Wind in the Willows* – the nationally rare water vole is still fairly abundant at Cley. Bearded tits are just one of the special attractions of Cley Marshes to birdwatchers.

Behind a storm-flung wall of shingle

A waving world of a million reeds and dappled waters

Cley Marshes hold a very special place in the history of British wildlife conservation. It was at the George Hotel, Cley, on Tuesday 14 March 1926, that Dr Sydney Long, who had purchased Cley Marshes for £5160 at auction a week earlier, held a meeting to form the Norfolk Naturalists' Trust, and to establish Cley Marshes as its first reserve. Thus began the County Wildlife Trust movement which today manages more than 2000 reserves nationally. The Trust founded by Sydney Long, now the Norfolk Wildlife Trust, is the largest of all the County Wildlife Trusts and manages more than 40 Norfolk reserves.

Cley reserve is famous for rare birds and it was here, in 1977, that avocets returned to Norfolk after an absence as regular breeders of more than 100 years. These marshes were well known to wildfowling and

naturalists long before they were designated a reserve. In 1896 Edward Ramm shot a Pallas's Warbler at Cley – the first ever seen in Britain. Thus began a series of Cley 'firsts' which includes semi-palmated sandpiper, pacific swift, fan-tailed warbler, rock sparrow, and yellow-breasted bunting – all new to the British list and all adding to Cley's reputation as one of the UK's top birding sites.

When you visit the reserve today it is difficult to imagine that in medieval times this area was all tidal saltmarsh. In 1649 the land was reclaimed from the sea, the enclosures creating grazing land and freshwater marshes.

There are two very different worlds to experience on a walk around the reserve. The crunch of shingle underfoot and the sound of breakers characterises the beach area. Cley's shingle ridge is the best place to look for yellow horned-poppies and flocks of finches. The resident goldfinches and linnets are joined in winter by their attractive black and white

northern cousins, the snow buntings. Inland discover a quieter world of waving reeds, cattle-grazed fields and shallow bird-haunted lagoons. Cley's reedbeds are home to bitterns, bearded tits and marsh harriers and in spring and autumn it's quite possible to see 20 species of wading birds, including perhaps a wind-drifted rarity. In winter the marshes are thronged with geese. Brent from Russia join the resident greylag and Canada geese. Large numbers of migrant ducks, pintail and wigeon from the north and east, also arrive in winter. Cley's famed East Bank is perhaps the best location in Britain to learn wader and wildfowl identification.

The marshes have been carefully managed for Norfolk Wildlife Trust by three generations of the Bishop family. Robert, Billy and today Bernard have wardened this site since the 1920s with the key to success being the ability to control water levels through a series of linked sluices. Norfolk reed is still cut in the traditional way on the reserve and sold for thatching.

The 43 hectares of reeds at Cley form the largest reedbed on the North Norfolk coast. Bitterns regularly breed here and this is one of the best sites for watching bearded tits and marsh harriers. Norfolk Wildlife Trust's thatched hides must rank as the most attractive and best designed of any on the Norfolk coast. In spring and autumn they provide excellent views of black-tailed godwits, spotted redshanks, curlew sandpipers and little stints as well as commoner waders. Avocets breed in good numbers on the lagoons. The shingle beach is a regular haunt of snow buntings and the sea in winter often has divers, grebes, and auks close inshore. The freshwater grazing marshes on both sides of the reedbeds are excellent for geese and wildfowl with large numbers of brent geese and wigeon throughout the winter. Otters and water voles frequent the dykes that edge the fields and lapwing and golden plover flocks are also regular in the fields here.

The reserve is owned by Norfolk Wildlife Trust and the coastline here is protected within the North Norfolk coast Site of Special Scientific Interest.



REED HARVESTING AT CLEY

Norfolk reed has been harvested at Cley Marshes for generations and archaeologists have demonstrated that reed was used in England at least as long ago as 500 BC for thatching houses.

Around 7000 bundles of reed are cut at Norfolk Wildlife Trust's Cley reserve between mid-December and the end of February. The cutting is now done mechanically rather than with traditional reed-scythes but the cut reed is still cleaned by hand using a short wooden rake with six-inch nails forming the rake-head. The cleaned reed is then tied in bundles roughly three hand-spans in circumference.

Reed from Cley is not only sold to local thatchers but is valued right across England wherever there are cottages to thatch. Bundles have even been sold for use as far afield as Ireland.

At Cley, the drier areas of the reedbed are cut every year, which helps maintain the reedbed in good condition. When necessary, harvested areas are burnt to remove the reed-litter left after cutting. This helps ensure a pure stand of good quality reed for the following year.



Opposite: Cley's best-known landmark.

Above: **Burning the reedbeds in winter prevents the build up of dead material.**

Below left: **Working the reedbeds at Cley – reedcutting.**

Below middle and right: **The bundled reeds will be sold for thatching.**

